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ABSTRACT

An on-line symposium on January 13, 1999, brought together policymakers, educators, parents, students, and local community reformers to discuss rural perspectives on academic standards. As part of an on-line dialogue extending from November 1998 to March 1999, the symposium linked on-line participants to panelists and participants in Burlington, Vermont, and six interactive cable television sites. The keynote speech, "Our Challenge: To Set the Highest Possible National Standard for Human Relationships" (Deborah W. Meier), discussed the web of relationships that makes every community a rich learning laboratory and the need for schools to be part of that web. Three issues were addressed by panelists and participants. First, since many communities are weak and impoverished in both economic and social terms, are they capable of being responsible for students' education? Second, standards carry the danger of being exploited for other purposes or used to establish "official knowledge." Who should set standards, who is the "community," and whose standards should prevail? Third, what kind of school funding policies support or undercut the potential of locally developed standards, and how does the state's "machinery of education" affect the strength of communities? Participants then offered advice and recommendations to communities, educators, legislators, and policymakers. Appendices include the keynote speech and the Rural Challenge's position paper on academic standards and community control. (SV)

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ED 435 508

Public School Standards: Discussing the Case for Community Control

A Report on the Electronic

Symposium Hosted by THE RURAL CHALLENGE

November 1998 - February 1999

The mission of the Rural Challenge is to build a rural community schools movement that links academic excellence with a sense of place and respect for community.

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Martin Douglas Strange

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

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Dear Colleague:

We're happy to send you this summary of our dialogue, "Public School Standards: Discussing the Case for Community Control," sponsored by the Rural Challenge Policy Program and hosted on our website, www.ruraledu.org.

Many of you from 45 states and three countries who registered for the symposium have actively participated in the discussion since it began in November 1998. We hope many more will. We believe strongly that in a democracy we get what we deserve. So we need to be engaged in a public debate that shapes public policy, and we hope that both this report and our encouragement of your participation will serve this end.

For those who don't yet know us, the Rural Challenge is a national nonprofit organization whose mission is to build a rural community schools movement that links academic excellence with a sense of place and respect for community. The Policy Program, in support of this mission, seeks to:

> ...understand complex issues affecting rural schools and communities; to inform the public debate over rural education policy; and to help rural communities act on education policy issues affecting them.

Working through partner projects in 33 states, the Rural Challenge supports place-based efforts in hundreds of schools. These projects reach thousands of rural students who are engaged in education rooted in discovering the potential of their communities–their own social, cultural, economic, and ecological heritage.

We have begun a conversation that needs to continue. Our website, our newsletter, a new listserv, and other communication tools will continue to host varied opinions, both sympathetic and contrary. Your comments have already contributed to the discussion about our draft policy statement, "Standards in Public Schools," which serves as the foundation document of the dialogue. (The statement appears in the appendices.) For this, and for your continuing care for rural communities and schools, we thank you.

Sincerely,

Marty Strange
Director

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A Report on the Electronic Symposium Hosted by

THE RURAL CHALLENGE

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P.O. Box 68, Randolph, VT 05060
Marty Strange, Policy Program Director
www.ruraledu.org

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I. Introduction

The Rural Challenge is a nonprofit foundation established to promote public school reform in rural America. Begun in 1995 with a challenge from Ambassador Walter Annenberg to match his generous pledge of funds, the Rural Challenge operates programs of grants, public engagement, and policy. The Rural Challenge Policy Program has brought rural perspectives to the national debate on standards as a strategy for educational change, first by drafting a policy position that brings local communities into the discussion, and then by promoting discussion of those ideas through a variety of means, including ongoing, on-line discussions and, in January, by hosting an electronic symposium to further engage the discussion. This paper presents a report of that symposium.

What is unique about rural perspectives on standards? What ideas does the Rural Challenge hope to bring to the debate? The Rural Challenge enthusiastically endorses the notion of high achievement by students. Indeed, many rural schools provide excellent educations through which students achieve at the highest levels, by any measure. We believe that setting high academic standards and measuring achievement against them is one useful strategy for encouraging high quality education, but that the quest for high standards can be exploited to serve other purposes if narrowly drawn.

The Rural Challenge encourages the development of three kinds of learning standards: (1) content standards that establish what the community expects the child to accomplish and are high enough to be challenging for each student; (2) context standards that root curriculum in local contexts and use the community and native environment as curriculum and as a filter for content standards; and (3) learning condition standards that assure appropriate learning conditions, such as the physical environment, access to school facilities and the opportunity to participate in school activities, the right of each student to be known and valued as a member of the school community, and the right of each student to participate in school decision-making. (The complete text of the Rural Challenge Policy Program statement on standards in public schools appears in the appendix and is available on-line at www.ruraledu.org)

The three-hour conference on January 13, 1999, brought together school board members, local community reformers, chief state education officers, teachers, students, parents, administrators and interested citizens from 45 states and three countries, linked by interactive cable televisions at seven sites and via individual computers. The symposium was a continuation of an on-line dialogue that began on the Internet in November 1998 and continued to March 1999. On-line participants were connected to the keynote speaker, moderator and three panelists in Burlington, Vermont, and to participants at interactive cable television sites in:

Montgomery, Alabama
Mendocino, California
Englewood, Colorado
Jackson, Mississippi
Lincoln, Nebraska
Portland, Oregon

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The Featured Speakers:

Moderator	Anne C. Lewis, national education and policy writer
Keynote Speaker	Deborah W. Meier, founder of Central Park East High School, author of *The Power of Their Ideas, Lessons from a Small School in Harlem* and principal of Mission Hill School in Boston's Roxbury Community
Panelists	Francisco Guajardo, teacher at Edcouch-Elsa High School and director of the Llano Grande Research Center, funded in part by the Rural Challenge
	John (Jack) Shelton, director of the Program for Rural Services and Research at the University of Alabama and of the 29-school, statewide PACERS Cooperative, also funded in part by the Rural Challenge
	Vito Perrone, director of the Graduate Teacher Education Program at Harvard University and of the documentation team for the Rural Challenge

Complete biographies are available on our website, www.ruraledu.org

"I believe the schools have failed us because they have already become too distant, too unfamiliar and unfamilial."

Deborah Meier, keynote speech

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II. The Rural Challenge Electronic Symposium
Discussion of Standards

Our vision is that every community is a richly detailed place able to provide a laboratory of learning; that children are young citizens whose work in school should serve to improve their community, and that education is the responsibility of the whole community, not only of professional educators.

The web of relationships that make every community a rich learning laboratory was the topic of the keynote speech by Deborah Meier, "Our Challenge: To Set the Highest Possible National Standard for Human Relationships." The entire speech appears in the appendices.

Meier opened with a discussion of the crisis and decline attributed to American education, with examples of what she sees as evidence of danger. Schools respond to the distrust by "offering more of what's sick about our culture, rather than suggesting that they can indeed be an antidote to what's rotten." She believes that they should move in the following directions:

- Schools are the one institution that could construct for the young what it means to be a member of a real community.
- Schools offer a way of learning together in the most efficient and productive way the species knows how, through the company we keep, by people we trust and want to emulate.
- (Schools) offer young people a serious sanctuary for their humanity, their intelligence, their caring.
- All children should attend schools where they are sure that they, and their families, are known and liked.
- American genius has always connected to our respect for practical know-how, ordinary close-to-the-earth common sense, local control, a little skepticism about expertise and Ph.D.s, and a lot of willingness to trust each other. Politicians and the media outdo each other to see who can make the direst claims.

> *"(Failures of the schools) are due to an increasing crisis of human relationships, of trust between fellow citizens, of a lack of shared belonging to a common public culture."*
>
> *Deborah Meier, keynote speech*

The three issues that organize the Rural Challenge approach to standards also organized the electronic symposium. The questions posed to the panelists and to E-Symposium participants follow, along with comments by panelists and electronic participants (a complete set of responses can be found on the website at www.ruraledu.org).

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III. Issue One: The Case for Community Control

The Rural Challenge draft policy statement says, "Strong communities are the best habitat for excellence in education and education is the responsibility of the whole community." What do you say when others say, "but many communities are not strong. Many are impoverished in both economic and societal terms. Perhaps they should not, even cannot, be responsible for the students' education?"

Jack Shelton, panelist:

Because stereotypes regarding race, the poor, and rural [people] often dominate judgments about competence and responsibility, crucial local capacity and knowledge are dismissed. Paternalism is substituted for partnership and for local democratic action.

Rural communities are subjected to inappropriate models for education when they are deemed incapable. The prime example is consolidation of schools and school systems. Consolidation is a powerful, ongoing and imposed industrial model that has a continuing disastrous effect upon rural communities. The model is partially grounded in the paternalistic notion that first ethnic and then rural people did not and do not have the capacity to educate their own children.

Francisco Guajardo, panelist:

Unfortunately, I think one of the things that is happening in education is that we're not really creating the structures where our kids–and even members of the community– get a chance to tell their stories. If we don't have our stories, what is it that we have? If we don't have our identities what is it that we can latch on to and be grounded with? It seems to me our relationships with one another, that teachers have with students, that teachers have with members of the community, are fundamental. Absolutely fundamental; [the relationships are] the key to education. I appreciate Deborah Meier doing the framing for us.

Vito Perrone, panelist:

We talk a lot about Michael Jordan setting the standard for dribbling, passing, defense, flying in the air, doing almost anything that relates to basketball. Michael Jordan didn't set that standard through any kind of external admonition. That standard was very internal to [him]. It was Jordan's intention, and it grew out of his own understanding of possibility, and it grew out of his interaction with other basketball colleagues. I think of standards always as growing from one's own self, out of our own intention.

The best schools that I know about–and I have spent most of my life in and out of school–are not schools that produce the highest test scores. But their students leave with some genuine expertise; they are confident, they can speak and write thoughtfully, they understand what it means to be responsible and caring, they know their local settings well, they are culturally rooted, they respect those that have gone before them, they see themselves as learners. To ask those schools to be guided mostly by the new standards and tests would be to reduce the quality of what they do. Quality has little to do with the external standards and tests that now prevail.

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Moderator Anne Lewis asked if communities are in fact "strong enough" to develop their own standards. Panelist Dr. Shelton responded:

When the word 'strong' is put [in the question] you begin to wonder who gets the right to define that. We sometimes forget the power of local communities and feel it's even necessary to question their capacity.

Rural people are made up of people who are intelligent, capable, interested in their communities, interested in relationships. They know their own places, they know their own people. Who better to set the standards for their children than these communities? When standards are set apart from the communities, local initiative is killed.

Sure enough there is need, sure enough there is an absence of resources in many places, but in the end, it is the community that will make the difference and it is the community that has to be recognized. And I think it has to be vested with the power not only to set its standards but to be able to look inside the schools and tell what's going on there so that local judgment can be applied to measure the standards that have been set.

Both on-site and on-line participants joined the discussion–offering agreement, dis-agreement, and expansions of their own. The input was wide-ranging, sparked by the keynote address, panelist comments on the "Case for Community Control," and the idea of internal versus external standards. Jane Lindall, UK/UL Joint Center for the Study of Educational Policy, echoed on-line Meier's concern that schools have not integrated the community in their pedagogies, standards and assessments:

Schools are not only too distant, too unfamiliar and unfamilial, but they are also entirely too arrogant. Professionalism in teaching fosters the belief that the public has no voice and no right to a voice in the education of its children and citizens. [Under these circumstances] the necessary mutual respect for collaboration will not materialize.

Jeannie Surface, principal of Wakefield Community School, speaking from Lincoln, Nebraska, linked relationships in school with the nurturing of individual creativity and saw standardized tests and the concern with competition as working against this end:

I think the most important thing we do in our school is about relationships and about unleashing creativity. And I don't see how that can possibly come about if a stand-ardized test is imposed on us. If we have a standardized test, teachers will use standards as the foundation of what they do for their lessons. So I can see the creativity being stifled.

"Fewer citizens vote today than they did in my youth. It's harder and harder to keep volunteer libraries and fire departments going. Kids spend more and more of their time in the hands of people who barely know them. That's a crisis."

Deborah Meier, keynote speech

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But Martin Saulsberry, a student from Delta High School, speaking from Jackson, Mississippi, disagreed, asking if community-formed standards are viable in the context of national competition:

If the standards the community has formed are not the standards that allow us to compete with the schools of the nation, are those standards really working for the school?

Sam McClain, superintendent of education in Cherokee County, speaking from Mont-gomery, Alabama, recognized from years of experience that the teacher-student relationship is the hub of the educational experience:

Throughout my career, I think the most important thing to teaching is the teacher in the classroom. When you close the door, it's just you and those students. You build [trust] over a period of time. We need to teach children how to learn for a lifetime of learning. If we do that, they're going to learn the basic skills.

And Bill Becker, director for the Center of Science Education at Portland State University, who was at the Oregon site, asserted the need for communities and their standards to be part of a national whole, emphasizing concern for how schools fare collectivly:

I like to think of education as a system and from a systems level, I know that systems have to interact in order to function properly. I worry about the lack of interaction among the components of the system. I would like to think that those of us in higher education would take upon ourselves the responsibility of being interpreters of standards–helping local citizens find a mechanism by which they can put those local standards into local practice and raise the capacity of young citizens to perform at developmentally appropriate levels.

Keynote speaker Deborah Meier, however, addressed the need for a new center of gravity in our thinking about schools. She reemphasized the preservation and integrity of communities. She indicated that the spirit of democracy itself is served, renewed, when the focus is on diversity rather than sameness. Communities should not shun others' ideas about standards just because they were not locally developed:

That's, I think, the point. That local communities–after listening to all that fight and argument–have got to decide, what are we going to do? And in a country with enormous amounts of standardization, I think we should stop worrying about schools having different standards. We're in a country where, if anything, there is more danger of standardization and sameness than the other way around.

"Even parents find negotiating schools harder and harder. They are made to feel more and more extraneous. Nuisances. Even if they are well-educated and well-spoken, they feel as strangers."

Deborah Meier, keynote speech

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IV. Issue Two: Whose Standards Matter?

The Rural Challenge draft policy statement notes, "setting high academic standards and achieving against them is an important educational objective. There is, however, a danger that standards can be used to establish 'official knowledge,' a state-determined correctness that damages intellectual integrity." Who sets standards? Who is the "community" and whose standards should prevail? Business people, educators at every level, religious leaders, governmental agencies, legislators, all have agendas. Does one group have a more important role than any other? Do different groups play different roles in different places? Are standards that are "home grown" more or less likely to be embraced by students, teachers, school leaders?

And what about equity? Are standards an equity issue? Does concern about equity tend to divert the pursuit of high standards toward the pursuit of standardized curricula? Can high standards be set and met for all without standardized curricula? Or are they jeopar-dized by standardized curricula?

Vito Perrone, panelist:

> *On their own, [rural schools] would more naturally work from their strengths–their ability to make education more personal, the need to draw more heavily on local resources and use more of the place as a basis for curriculum. The course structures with their various clock-based requirements keep the schools distant from what is important locally. This is not a path to higher quality schooling and learning.*
>
> *I believe our resources should be devoted to helping all schools, teachers and communities develop high-quality settings. This means getting closer to the settings, not standing far away.*

Anne Wheelock, author of numerous education writings including *Safe to Be Smart: Building a Culture for Standards-Based Reform in the Middle Grades* (National Middle School Association):

> *If the standards are employers, or military or post-secondary people, or even bankers who are willing to give a loan to a student who wants to start his or her own business–which I find a lot of times to be happening in rural communities–then those people have a lot to say that's legitimate about how well the school is doing. And I think it should be factored into how schools are evaluated.*

Jack Shelton, panelist:

> *A legitimate question is, if you're a talker, when will you be a doer? And how does money get into the conversation, and how does time get into the conversation–and also, what or how do we develop, how do we extend the effort at clear, creative, and collaborative conversations among groups who are saying that 'the sky is falling' [because of the alleged crisis in education].*

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Perrone conveyed in his on-line essay in response to "Whose Standards" that the best standards are those that mean something to the students themselves–those that have the right ownership. But doing what really matters takes time–more than is typically allowed in the way school time is structured. He wrote:

> *Children and young people have little time to complete work they can truly honor. And it is through work they can honor that standards that matter get set and advanced. In this standards context, will there be time for students to do good work that grows from their own intentions, from questions they have, around things that truly matter for them? Will the premium be on more and more–that continuing fascination with coverage–or on much less with higher quality? Will standards be real work or checklists to work through?*

Perrone lamented, with Meier, the ineffectiveness of "distant experts," whose standards are often presumed to matter most:

> *Why is it that those who speak so confidently, who seem to know so much about children's development and needs, what will serve them best, stand so far away from classrooms, children and young people? From a distance everything appears so simple–a few rigorous tests will certainly fix things, even though tests have been around for a long time and they somehow haven't made the world right.*

Francisco Guajardo put new emphasis on his and others' expressed conviction that the local community should be the source and measure of school standards. Yet he took issue with the issue itself, saying that basic human needs must be attended to in many rural communities, so that their inherent capacity to form standards can be released:

> *Do my people in my community have the capacity to develop standards? Yes. But I'll tell you, if they're playing with 50 cents of the dollar that folks in other places are playing with, I don't think it's fundamental, this question of whose standards matter. I think there are other issues, more real issues, that we need to begin to tackle.*

Yet, Guajardo also underscored the community's wherewithal to handle its own affairs:

> *Rural communities can take care of themselves very well. I'm a believer, based on my own experience, that the most efficient cycle is that which is organic, that which is indigenous. It is by far the most insightful. I mean, who knows about one's community better than the person who lives there? Who knows about kids' temperaments, about the culture of a town, and its environment, better than the people who live there?*

Deborah Meier's perspective on "Whose Standards?" led her to consider the requirements of a democracy–of having broader, not just higher standards. Acquiring the evidence for this or that standard, then debating it, is fundamental. However, a standardization of standards should not be the end result. She made it clear that it's not provincialism we want, but a "reaching out."

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We want people to be able to walk, not only in the shoes of the rural community, but walk in other people's shoes. Democracy depends upon people who understand something more than their own experience. So there's a lot of reasons we need experts, why we need other opinions, or why we need each other–for small communities to hear from big communities–for one part of the country to share with people from other parts of the country.

Once again, regional and on-line participants joined the discussion–agreeing, disagreeing, and introducing variant factors into the conversation:

Diana Lyons, assistant principal at a high school in Beatrice, speaking from Montgomery, Alabama, picked up on both Guajardo's and Meier's comments:

Francisco, the gentleman that spoke, I can relate to him. My children, we have to deal with first feeding and clothing and housing and keeping warm, and we have to deal with survival before we can teach them. And while standards [must come under] commu-ity control, [they] do not deal with survival.

A participant at the Burlington, Vermont, site who was not identified pointed to the change that is actually happening, as a basis for suggesting a resolution to the question of whose standards matter:

Classroom teachers talking to each other– that is very, very powerful, and that's where I see change happening. I do not see the effects of distant experts on the classroom. However, distant experts do have a tremendous effect on politics and political decisions. We [teachers and communities] probably don't have the effect that we should because I do not hear these conversations about democracy, communities and relationships being expressed in legislatures, and that is where we need to hear them."

Scott Thompson, assistant director of the Panasonic Foundation, took issue on-line with Dr. Perrone's portrayal that those influencing education reform are necessarily removed from local contexts–though this participant fully concurred that meaningful standards do not come from those who "push for national standards and national tests:"

Who is 'standing far away?' The teacher who has worked on standards writing teams and is creatively striving to help each student in her classroom reach the learning goals that people throughout her community have collectively agreed upon? I believe that it is only when one is standing at a distance that standards can appear to be a monolithic movement in the direction of standardized education. On the ground, at least some of what I find is a transformational movement in precisely the opposite direction.

I see no brighter promise for transforming teaching and learning so that all students can be expected to perform at high levels than in locally driven standards-based reform. [But] fulfilling this promise will be arduous. It requires, for example, a level of investment in the professional development of teachers, principals, and others in the system that far exceeds current practice.

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Mark Stensvold, a teacher from Minnesota on-line, assumed that the standards that truly matter are those evolved in local communities, while disparaging the fact that it's hard for communities to keep those who could help them most. He offered this solution:

I dream sometimes of helping older, rural folks with college degrees become teachers in the towns they know and love. It would be relatively simple these days with alternative certification and distance learning tech-nology. I think those people would have a better chance of helping their small towns to look inward for standards than I ever had as a 22-year-old transplant.

Clarence Bina, a dassroom teacher from North Dakota (on-line), added to the chorus of teacher involvement, discussing how standards should evolve. The challenge he points to seemed to have the concurrence of most other teacher-participants:

Most North Dakota teachers are underpaid (bottom of the barrel), exhausted from four to six preps a day, feel exploited, and thus are withdrawing from anything that will require any more of their time–such as engaging in staff development focused on standards or some other in-service topic. To state the obvious, the standards movement will not move without them.

> *"Democracy is not just a set of judicial relationships. It rests on the possibility of understanding one another...and we cannot learn these things if we haven't experienced them... If we allow our nation's children to be raised by institutions over which no thoughtful grown-ups are in charge, we are abandoning our democratic institutions as well."*
>
> *Deborah Meier, keynote speech*

Anne Wheelock, author, wrote on-line:

Real standards are not about lists, nor are they about more testing or using test scores to determine grade promotion or graduation, all of which have created an aura of rigor without substance and have resulted in 'standards' that harm our most vulnerable students. Rather, standards are about quality–how relationships in a school meet standards of quality, and how the work products students create as they learn meet standards of quality. The 'external standards' that can energize teaching and learning are standards for quality that are inherent in the field of work [that] students engage in.

If students, for example, are doing a study of water quality, herbicide use, soil erosion, development patterns, forestry, or radon gas in their community, the external standards of value to their learning are the standards that apply to the work processes and final products of environmental scientists, sociologists, biologists, chemists, and planners.

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If students are writing plays, novels, auto-biographies or biographies, and if they want to produce work that is worthy of placing in the school or public library for others to see, students need to understand the standards that define excellence in writing, researching, illustrating and publishing.

Regional participant Bill Windler at the Englewood, Colorado, site works with the Colorado Department of Education on accreditation and accountability issues, particularly in relation to charter schools. His comments, and the response from Toni Haas that follows, set in relief two contrasting views–not only on "whose standards," but standards for what?

I think we need to bring the discussion back to some reality. I think that we first need to understand that small rural school districts are in the export business in terms of preparing students. The vast majority of [these students] are not going to stay in rural communities. I think we need to talk about how these students are going to be able to compete in the broader market place.

I came from rural Colorado and I can fix the windmill and I can clean the barn. I can put a porch on the old homestead. But those kinds of skills are getting me nowhere. So we need to look in terms of that broader importance of the academic content standard. I think the standards need to be put in place, we need to have a good state assessment program, and we need accreditation that has consequences that focus around achieving the academic content standards at high levels.

Toni Haas, at the Englewood, Colorado, site responds:

I'm Toni Haas. Paul Nachtigal and I are co-directors of the Rural Challenge. We didn't plan this, but I can't overestimate how much I disagree with my friend, Bill.

I actually live in Colorado and we run the Rural Challenge from there. So we don't think that rural schools should be in the exporting business. In fact we think the fact that they have been in the exporting business is part of their having been forced to adopt an approach to education that is not suited to anyone, urban or suburban, and particularly not rural. The essence of the Rural Challenge is to create a reform movement that lets schools, rural schools and communities get better together. We think that's essential.

For me, the essence of the argument is about [Deborah Meier's] distinction between higher standards and broader standards. And what the Rural Challenge believes is important in education reform is broader standards that take into account–not the sorting, and the sense of a closed universe that higher or lower standards do–but rather, standards that include all of the parts of being human. We talk about it in terms of learning to live well, and learning to live well in a place. It's about citizenship. It's about partici-pation. And it's about learning skills that you take with you wherever you end up living.

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V. Issue Three: Standards–the Good, the Bad and the Controlling

The Rural Challenge draft policy statement asserts, "Standards help define the limits of state government's responsibility to provide equal educational opportunity to children and therefore can be used or misused to shape legislative and judicial decisions affecting equity. The relationship between high stand-ards and equity is very important to rural communities because small schools can be closed in the name of raising standards and improving educational opportunity when, in fact, the objective is nothing more than to lower costs per pupil.

This bias against small schools exists despite the evidence that small schools perform well, especially in lower socioeconomic commun-ities and when costs are measured per graduate." What kind of school financing policies support or undercut the potential of locally developed standards? How does the "machinery of education" that is school accreditation, teacher certification, building permits, federal aid and guidelines, and state school finance formulas, affect the strength of communities? What are your suggestions for redesigning that machinery?

"Real autonomy" to Francisco Guajardo has to do with equity. He addressed this topic in an on-line essay, which panelists and other partic-ipants responded to, that decries a system of power and influence that worked against the possibilities of true community control:

> *How much autonomy do poor areas across America really have when they're at an economic disadvantage?*
>
> *In Texas, the dominant standard is the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) test: the one common measure by which every public school district and campus is evaluated. The stakes are so high with TAAS performance that the test often brings fear to administrators and teachers alike, and it unfortunately dictates how instruction is delivered in many schools across the state.*

Guajardo went on to say that the gap between the "haves and have nots" is likely to widen (assuming the validity of many economic forecasts). He said, "Many rural people will be left behind. School finance formulas should address those inequities if public schooling is to play a role in systemic social and educational reform."

Reflecting on Guajardo's portrayal of the fear inducing–i.e., controlling–state test, Deborah Meier observed that "in a democratic community there cannot be a single definition of what it means to be a 'well-educated' person."

Concurring with Guajardo, Jack Shelton saw standardized tests as often destructive:

> *We know that whatever cultivates the students' interests–their emotional engage- ment, their hope and their aspiration–is what we want. Smart, poor, rural kids sometimes don't do well on*

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standardized tests. They end up becoming more passive and sometimes it makes them cynical. I've had kids say to me, 'Why am I taking this test, so the teacher can keep her job? Or the school can stay open?' It's an unfair burden on kids when the process gets that far down the road. So what I'm saying is that we ask if the standards engage kids, whatever the standards are.

Greg Smith of Lewis and Clark College speaking from Portland, Oregon, said:

It seems to this point that the primary purpose of the standards movement has been to try to stimulate the creation of a world-class work force in the United States. [Essentially] standards are used to sort students and are played out on an individual basis. What I'm wondering is whether it would be possible to create alternative standards that were really aimed at looking at how you could go about preparing young people to be responsible citizens, active and involved citizens, in sustainable communities and look at standards from the collective rather than individual [point of view].

Rob Meltzer, director of the Community of Learners Charter School, in Durango speaking from Englewood, Colorado:

Tomorrow I'm going to go back to my building. I know that my mailbox is going to be filled with a big stack of correspond-ence. A lot of it is going to have to do with state standards. It's going to come from the State Department of Education, the superintendent's office, the human resource office, the student achievement office, the student curriculum office.

The unfortunate thing is, that doesn't leave me any amount of time to be a visionary leader, to really do what I feel is most important in my heart. So I have to say that what I am going to do with that stack of stuff is push it aside for a little while. I'm going to say this is not the most important thing, and I'm going to go here and say what's in my heart. I'm going to go to my students, to my teachers, to my parents and to the community and to the place where I live and I'm going to say, "what needs to be done, what's the most important thing here?" And then I'm going to look at the standards as a tool, as something that can help me fill in the blanks and say what we have missed.

Dick Stephens, superintendent of Albion schools, speaking from Lincoln, Nebraska:

These [innovative community projects] are real personal experiences for children. The outcomes have been deemed by students to have created high standards for the students themselves. This teaches them to set high standards because they know that what they're doing has real meaning to real projects. As the result, the students and teachers are exceeding any standard that will be adopted in the State of Nebraska. They set the standards from within. For that reason [in Nebraska], I don't think we have a worry in the world about standards.

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Others did have worries.

George Swanson, research associate at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, in Portland, Oregon, participating on-line wrote:

Educators are fearful of standards because they, teachers, school districts, etc., will be held accountable for their outcomes. They may think they must 'teach to the test' and diminish their 'humanistic approach' to their teaching. As a former classroom teacher, I know that both are achievable. However, if the process and methodology used does not accomplish the goal of meeting the state standards then something had better change! Business as usual in education must change. We have too many students who sit for twelve years in school and emerge illiterate in basic skills, all as a result of 'local standards.'

Alan Lee, superintendent of schools, in Rawlins, Wyoming, participating on-line wrote:

External standards are not the problem; however, externally imposed standards potentially are detrimental. I agree that locally developed standards are most important, but there must also be a recognition that we all are interested in how 'national/international' standards compare to what we do in our local schools. Just as there is an international standard for the technology of brakes on cars, there too is an international standard for what composes an 'educated person.'

Parent and regional participant Leonard Harris speaking from Jackson, Mississippi, introduced the theme of parent involvement into the discussion concerning what it is that controls– by intention or by default–the course of edu-cation. His comment is typical of others who recognized the degree to which parents, among the most obvious partners in children's education, have become estranged from the process:

We know that community involvement in the development of standards helps develop the student as a whole, not just academically, but socially and spiritually, and with the lack of community involvement, I feel like we lose certain things like morals and values which seem to be missing these days. How can you get the community to take part when it's hard to get parents and commun-ities to come out to PTA meetings, when it's hard to get them to come to the classroom unless there's a problem there?

Another parent/participant at the Jackson, Mississippi, site shed light on Harris' observation:

We have managed to weed out the community, especially where the parent is involved. You can't get parents to come to meetings because they don't feel like they are welcome or that they have a place. So, if you involve people [in ways] where they feel like they are welcome and can contribute, then you have no problem with people wanting to be involved.

Panelist Jack Shelton posed questions in an on-line essay that serve as a check on standards and assessments. He asked:

Are schools, teachers and students invigorated? Are schools frozen, fearful, and conformed? Are the professional aspirations and responsibilities of teachers strengthened or are their self-esteem

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and morale diminished? What happens to students in the process, especially students who live in profound poverty? Are they challenged or puzzled? Are their aspirations to be good students enhanced or will they become cynical under the pressure to save their schools and/or their teachers' jobs?

What will be done with the results? What purposes are to be served? And who understands those goals and purposes? How will they make things better? What policies and actions will they engender?

Are there a variety of ways in which the progress of students is measured? Is the process for the implementation of higher standards and standards measurement equitable, and does it promote equity? Who is committed to raising the funds necessary to improve the prospect of at-risk and poor children? To succeed, the movement for higher standards must engage and be informed by local schools and communities; it must recognize the competence and concern of the majority of teachers; it must do justice, not harm, to children of poverty.

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VI. Advice for Communities, Educational Professionals, Legislators and Policy Makers

In the last, fast-moving minutes of the January 13 E-Symposium, moderator Anne Lewis called for advice and recommendations from participants. Given the pace of the discussion, some of the speakers were not identified.

My main suggestion is that you should give students a voice. It's always been that it's up to the teachers, and before them, up to the politicians. The students know what's going on. They know what they're learning and what they're not learning. So give them a chance to have a say.

Michael Minkus, a student from Mendocino County

I would like to see [higher education] take up the challenge of this standards movement. I would like to see them helping local districts and building-level folks interpret universal standards in a way that is going to make sense in a context of the community they're serving.

Bill Becker in Portland, Oregon

There needs to be a recognition that there is no agreement on what standards are or how they're implemented. It's a public policy question, and as in all public policy questions it results in a conflict of ideas. The importance of conversations like this is to bring out the importance of continuing dialogues, especially, ideas from rural areas that often have fewer spokespersons at their state capitals.

Ed Steinbrecher in Englewood, Colorado

State policy makers should look at more equitable economic development policies for rural areas as a means to halt rural areas from being the 'exporters.' Rather than discussing ways to create human capital, we need to talk about how to change the environments that address human needs.

A speaker in Lincoln, Nebraska

I'm the editor of the editorial page of our school and community newspaper. I agree with Dr. Shelton. When a student gets hands-on experience in the community–as we become the scientists and publishers–it raises our standards. Really and truly it does.

Terrelle Hunter, a student in Montgomery, Alabama

We must set standards that lead to both equity and excellence and prepare students to participate in society in whatever way they so choose.

A speaker at the Jackson, Mississippi, site.

Standards and tests are clear, clean and quick. They're politically powerful. Newspapers love them. People see them as quick fixes and magic bullets. Today we've heard a lot of strong emotion and passionate feeling, but with a very fuzzy message. My recommendation is to speak cleaner and clearer.

A Burlington, Vermont, speaker

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Maybe it's time for policy makers to acknowledge that they have been very successful in starting a debate, and declare this a major victory. Then invite a consor-tium of local schools and communities to come together and develop standards and accountability systems that they believe respond better to local needs, and address large education concerns in a public manner.

Panelist Vito Perrone

I think that [the conversation] will become more clear as it becomes more participatory. If we regress to the traditional way of doing things with only a few people, after a while they monopolize it. The Rural Challenge must ensure that it's an inclusive discussion.

Panelist Francisco Guajardo

We stand firm on the idea that the people who make important decisions about our kids have to know and like them, and their families. Further, any legislative body that imposes tests must first take [the tests] and have their scores listed in rank order. If they think that's a fair thing to do to our kids and our schools, let them do it first.

Keynote speaker Deborah Meier

I believe small schools have proven their strength and they're especially good for at-risk kids. I wish this were an on-going part of the discussion of standards, which [has to do with] the nature of the institution in which kids are learning.

Panelist Jack Shelton

"Kids are genuinely hungry for communities."

Deborah Meier, keynote speech

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VII. Conclusion

Marty Strange, director of the Rural Challenge Policy Program, concluded the January 13th E-Symposium by seeing it as a classically American forum for constructive controversy.

"You know," he said, "this issue of local control versus national commonwealth has been at the heart of the American political debate from its inception, and it's never been right or wrong. It's been a matter of seeking a delicate balance that has been what most of the big fights in American politics have been about.

"And so you don't have to win in politics," he went on. "Sometimes you can just prevail over time. And I think we have to take the philosophy that our dealing with that issue and achieving that delicate balance is not one of winning or losing, but getting to the right point in that balance." Indicating that worthy struggle and debate is the only way change comes about, Strange said, "This is more than a conversation. Please join in!" Thus, the E-Symposium's January 13th event ended with an unmistakable road sign–pointing to the urgent need for continuing, inclusive interaction.

The discussion of national standards continues at the Rural Challenge Policy Program website, www.ruraledu.org. Join in.

Additional copies of this report are available. Contact:

Rural Challenge Policy Program
P.O. Box 68
Randolph, VT 05060
802-728-5899
rchallenge@quest-net.com

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Appendix A

Our Challenge: To Set the Highest Possible National Standard for Human Relationships

Keynote Speech by Deborah W. Meier
January 13, 1999

There's a lot of crisis and decline talk when it comes to American education. Politicians and the media outdo each other to see who can make the direst claims. (That the USA ranks tops in literacy on international assessments is literally a buried news story.) We're fast abandoning all forms of local control over our school, and entering into a wholly new scenario in which schools are controlled by increasingly distant experts in a response to this incessant emergency talk.

We're told that this new direction is necessary because the schools have failed us. And we cannot survive the failure.

And indeed, I'm in agreement with that. Although for entirely different reasons. In fact, what we're fast abandoning are the remnants of what most needs to be saved.

I believe our schools have failed us because they have already become too distant, too unfamiliar and unfamilial. They have, in fact, done a remarkably good job of teaching the '3Rs', and a bunch of other academic stuff. And the test scores confirm rather than disconfirm this.

The growth of home-schooling is not due to the rigid ideologues of the far right, nor the result of parents afraid that their children will fail to make the grade on the latest academic assessment tools.

Nor are charter schools, and the movement for vouchers the result of declining test scores–which in fact are not declining, although they are made more credible by such claims.

They are due to an increasing crisis of human relationships, of trust between fellow citizens, of lack of a sense of shared belonging to a common public culture. Schools are not as physically dangerous as the media portray, but they are dangerous to the spirit–especially the needed spirit of trustfulness.

And our schools are responding to the distrust by offering more of what's sick about our culture, rather than suggesting that they can indeed be an antidote to what's rotten.

Yes. It's a fact. There's something new in the land. Fewer citizens–not merely 18-year-olds but 21- and 25-year-olds–vote today than they did in my youth. That's a crisis. It's harder and harder to keep volunteer libraries and fire departments going. That's a crisis. Kids spend more and more of their time in the hands of people who barely know them. That's a crisis.

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And it will get worse, not better, unless we all–rural folk, city folk, white Americans, Black Americans, rich and poor, join forces to stop it. All of us must join together because what has caused the crisis affects us all and what it would mean to lose, will injure us equally. And when we lose our local communities and the relationships that bind them together, it still won't make the kids in the end get higher scores!

Lots of things have come together to cause our current problems. People no longer expect to raise their children near grandparents and aunts and uncles who can keep an eye on them. People do not expect their jobs to last a lifetime; nor their marriages. Nor their friends. They see the institutions around them as impersonal and impermanent. These present a clear and present danger to us all.

We are wealthier–or at least most of us are–in material resources, but more nervous about our human resources.

Some of these changes are hard to do much about, or at least hard for us to see how we can affect them. But some of them are easily within our control. And one of those that's still within our reach is our schools.

Our schools are a conscious invention and intervention by local communities into the rearing of the next generation of its fellow citizens. That's not only their history, but their constitutional basis. They are a way to have a say into the values and social and intellectual skills and habits of the adults of tomorrow.

Their importance is greater than ever before, and yet we have less and less of a sense of control over them. "For our own good" we are being promised a future in which they are out of our reach entirely.

Parents, if they can afford it, will have a voice in the education of their own individual child if vouchers become the norm. But even then such schools may be monitored and regulated to a degree that no public school has ever been before. And vouchers give the citizens of our country no part to play, except insofar as they believe that electing someone to Congress is a way to shape the school right down the block! No wonder voting seems less and less appealing. It's too much like a magical incantation.

We are about to turn over the what and how of educating the young to a combination of state and national experts, politicians, and test makers–even as less than half our fellow citizens trust or understand the workings of our society enough to vote, much less to the experts who are poised to redesign the schools of the future.

If the schools have failed us, it's because they got too big, too far away from the "us" who know the kids best, and too standardized and uniform to respond to the particulars of each child and each community.

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Schools are the one institution that could construct for the young what it means to be a member of a real community, made up of adults of various ages alongside youngsters of various ages. Such schools offer a way of learning together in the most efficient and productive way the species knows how, through the company we keep, by people we trust and want to emulate. That's what schooling has traditionally meant.

When I was a child there were 200,000 school boards–over a million citizens–one in 100, saw themselves as governors of their schools. Most people, in short, knew somebody who knew somebody who ran our schools.

Furthermore, a majority of citizens had school-age kids. And the schools they went to rarely were larger than a few hundred, and often only a few dozen pupils constituted a school. The school was a familiar place.

Today there are less than 20,000 school boards–and twice as many citizens. Maybe one in 20,000 citizens serves on a school board. And the schools they oversee house well over a thousand students, and are often located far from their own hometowns. And most Americans no longer have school-age children at all.

It's easy to see how such already distanced and alienated schools could become the focus of distrust; suspect as the nurturers of our young; not public but 'government' owned. Who knows anymore what is really going on, except as the media portray it? Who knows what to make of claims of disaster, criminality, ignorance and worse going on in the classrooms of America? Who and what to check it out against? Cynicism comes easily.

And even parents find negotiating schools harder and harder. They are made to feel more and more extraneous. Nuisances. Even if they are well-educated and well-spoken, they feel as strangers.

By the time kids reach high school they have often attended several different schools, most divided into discrete age-groups (Preschools, K-2, 3-5, 6-8, 9-12) with many different and changing principals and superintendents. By the time they get to high school their beloved child is, at best, a number in a great sea of children. Who does the parent call when in doubt? Who knows their child well enough to join in their worries? Who can offer to keep in touch? Who could intervene on his or her behalf?

No one.

Not because teachers are less caring. But because for over 40 years we've been making it harder and harder for teachers to know their students–or their colleagues–well. They work in isolation, and in increasingly prescribed circumstances. They run faster just to stand still. If the faculty meet to put their wise heads together, the gathering is one of hundreds. What kind of deliberation does this mean for a bunch of busy professionals. Who listens? Who's paying attention? Who's watching the clock to see how soon the meeting will end?

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And so too their students. They're also just waiting for the bell to ring, to return to the communities–of peers–that really matter.

There is less and less room for individual pacing, interests, and styles. And it is harder and harder for anyone to say, "Stop, this doesn't make sense." Because no one is in charge. And no one has the time.

But kids are hungry for genuine communities, as the nerds and jocks remind us. They like being part of clubs that include older and younger kids and adults of all ages–especially adults who are genuinely knowledgeable, skillful and, above all–powerful. And if and when we organize schools sensibly, it turns out kids are much like we nostalgically remember them as being! They are often naughty, occasionally rebellious, and even occasionally outrageous–but mostly loyal, loving, enthusiastic, curious and desirous of becoming more powerful, more competent and better able to care for themselves and those they love, including even the world itself. They recapture such qualities fast, as though they are just waiting in the wings for us to offer them a serious sanctuary for their humanity, their intelligence, their caring.

What the Central Park East schools in New York and now Mission Hill in Boston remind me is that it's still possible to reverse a bad idea–to go back to what counts.

It's time to remind the true conservatives that the American genius was always connected to our respect for practical know-how, ordinary close-to-the-earth common sense, local control, a little skepticism about expertise and Ph.D.s, and a lot of willingness to trust each other.

These are the qualities we dare not abandon in the raising of our children. Not only out of love for our children, but out of love for our country and–in all sincerity–for the republic for which it stands.

Democracy is not just a set of juridical relationships. It rests on relationships–on the possibility of understanding each other, of walking in each other's shoes, of imagining that we can trust each other–warily, skeptically–but not cynically.

And we cannot learn these things if we haven't experienced them–not just in the bosom of our family, but also in the bosom of our communities–those varied associations that we join in the course of life. We can no more learn what it means to rely on each other, to be responsive and responsible to each other in the absence of having experienced it than we can learn to speak a language we have never heard spoken. If we allow our children–not just our own biological ones but our nation's children–to be raised by institutions over which no thoughtful grown-ups are in charge, we are abandoning our democratic institutions as well.

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So it's not a small fight, it's not an easy struggle, but it's an essential one. And it's not a whit different, except in detail, in the middle of East Harlem or Roxbury than in the rural communities that you come from.

As we continue this dialogue over the coming days, I suspect it will be hard to tell at times whether we are urban or rural, liberal or conservative, rich or poor. Especially if we can lay claim to a different kind of language to express our concerns, rather than the latest technocratic jargon. Our children are not "products," their work is not an "outcome," their purpose is not to be "tools" in a larger global competition. How they grow up is a matter as much of habits of the heart as habits of the mind–neither of which are much in evidence in the schools of today or the ones the well-intended fixers have in mind for tomorrow.

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Appendix B

An Invitation to Discuss Standards in Public Schools: The Rural Challenge Perspective

In Brief: Strong local communities are the best habitat for excellence in education and education is the responsibility of the whole community. Setting high academic standards and achieving against those standards is an important educational objective, but the quest for higher standards can be exploited to serve other purposes. This statement sets out the Rural Challenge's general view of this important policy issue.

The Rural Challenge is rooted in the belief that strong local communities are the best habitat for excellence in education. From our perspective, every community is a richly detailed place able to provide a laboratory for learning, children are young citizens whose work in school should serve to improve their community, and education is the responsibility of the whole community, not only of pro- fessional educators. How does this philosophy respond to the call for high academic standards in public schools?

Setting high academic standards and achieving against those standards is an important educational objective that is now widely held. The standards movement is diverse, including many business and political leaders, pro- fessional educators, cultural activists, and others. It is motivated by many concerns about the direction and effectiveness of America's schools.

The policy debates surrounding standards are closely tied to school finance reform and governance, teacher education, school accreditation, and other issues. With this central role comes the risk that the quest for higher standards can be exploited to serve other political purposes. Standards can help achieve excellence. Misused, they can serve less worthy purposes. All concerned with educa- tion policy and practice should be deliberate in their approach to standards.

This statement sets out the Rural Challenge's general view of this important policy issue. We invite critical responses to this statement from those–especially rural people–who have different perspectives from our own.

Whose Standards Matter?

In Brief: Standards should originate within the community in which the student lives; they should be used to measure the student's achievement and the school's performance; they should be widely shared and understood by all members of the community; and they should be both explicit and comprehensible to lay people. Students should internalize the highest

This preliminary statement has been approved by the Rural Challenge Board of Directors for circulaation to the general public. Comments are invited and will be considered by the Baord in developing a final statement.

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standards of excellence in the pursuit of knowledge and in the development of the judgment needed to apply that knowledge. Standards should include the broader learning standards of a fully developed community with an educational mission to help all people develop their intellectual capacity. The process of adopting standards is itself important because it can both strengthen content and increase public acceptance of those standards. The process should be participatory and inclusive, and genuine in both.

Standards should originate within the community in which the student lives; they should be used to measure the student's achievement and the school's performance; they should be widely shared and understood by all members of the community; and they should be both explicit and comprehensible to lay persons. Students should internalize the highest standards of excellence in the pursuit of knowledge and in the development of the judgment needed to apply that knowledge.

For a long time, public schools in America have operated under standards that do not meet these requirements. There are defacto standards that result from the interaction of discipline-based professional associations, testing services, textbook companies, and institutions of higher education. There are also the surrogate standards that regulate the ways and means of schooling–school accreditation, teacher certification, building permits, federal aid guidelines, and state school finance formula. For too long, too much attention has been placed on prescribing the machinery of education. Clearly, the great potential of the standards movement is to restore to local communities real autonomy in the conduct and performance of public education. But to accomplish this, schools and communities must be largely freed from such defacto and surrogate standards and inspired instead to focus on results in student achievement and development.

That inspiration should originate from the community that surrounds the child and fills his or her experience with meaning. Teachers need to teach from the experience of the community to intellectually rigorous standards. In this cause, the importance of local educational role models cannot be overemphasized. Parents, teachers, admin-istrators, civic, business, and spiritual leaders, and other adults with whom a child has direct daily contact either nourish high standards or starve them. The challenge for the standards movement is not merely to coax adoption of nominally high standards in every school, but to generate real operationally high standards from within every community in the nation.

In fact, the high standards we envision here are not limited to the academic standards that should be at work in the school house. Instead, they should include the broader learning standards of a fully developed commuity with an educational mission to help all people develop their intellectual capacity. In such a community, the school will certainly be an integral part of education, but not the exclusive institution for achieving community educational goals. The community serves as the functional model of both the standards and their application, within the school and without.

We are not naive about the willingness, enthusiasm, and capacity of local communities to meet this challenge. The fiber of commu-ity throughout our society has been badly weakened, and even where the will to perform is strong, the fiscal and social resources are

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often strained. It is therefore very important that states play a central role in helping local communities by offering opportunities for cross-community cooperation, idea sharing, and interaction in developing their own standards. We hope communities think about their place and their importance in a national and global community, and benefit from understanding approaches taken by other peoples in other places. Our call for community standards is not a call for isolationism or provincialism. Moreover, the process of adopting standards is itself important because it can both strengthen content and increase public acceptance of those standards. The process should be parti- cipatory and inclusive, and genuine in both. We are aware that it is easy to manipulate "public input," and to dismiss or discount those whose views are controversial or curious. But a patient, open process will produce standards that can be supported, and are more likely to be achieved than those produced in haste by disingenuous means.

It is therefore especially important that standards be both explicit and comprehensible to those whose work is most directly affected by them: children, parents, and teachers. All should be able to see plainly whether a student is progressing against these standards. They must "own" the standards under which they work, and it is more important that they understand and believe in those standards than that those standards are "high" in official estimation. To borrow a phrase from Thomas Jefferson, "Self government is always better than good government."

Three Kinds of Standards

In Brief: The Rural Challenge encourages development of three kinds of learning standards: (1) Content Standards that establish what the community expects the child to accomplish and are high enough to be challenging for each student; (2) Context Standards that provide a pedagogy of place using the community and the native environment as curriculum and as filter for content standards; and (3) Learning Condition Standards that assure appropriate learning conditions, such as the physical environment, access to school facilities and opportunity to participate in school activities, the right of each student to be known and valued as a member of the school community, and the right of each student to participate in school decision making.

The Rural Challenge encourages development of three kinds of learning standards:

Content Standards: These standards should establish what the community expects the child to accomplish. They must be high enough to be challenging for each student. The level of specificity in the standards should be pragmatic. Content standards can be unrealistically prescriptive and dangerously naive about pedagogical limitations. Zeal is no substitute for developmentally appropriate rigor in academic standards. There is a danger that unrealistic standards will ultimately be ignored, and the result contrary to the purpose of achieving high performance. Content standards should focus on the capabilities sought in the students, not on the minutia of data to be transmitted to them. They should be inspirational to teachers, not dictatorial. There are many models of good content standards, and unfortunately, quite a few models of bad ones.

Public School Standards: Discussing the Case for Community Control

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Context Standards: Every school should be well rooted in a locale, and that locale should provide the context within which students learn. Context standards should provide for a pedagogy of place using the community and the native environment as curriculum and as filter for content standards. Context standards should provide for transmitting knowledge about the particular place the school inhabits, and about the importance of all places as habitats for community and for learning. They should aim at preparing students to accept responsibility for becoming good citizens wherever they choose to live; they should address the skill requirements for living well in a sustainable community; and they should free children to choose to leave or to stay in their native place. They should take advantage of native ways of knowing and learning, provide for the opportunity to learn from know-ledgeable and wise people in the community, including those not certified to teach, and equip children to live in their own cultural environment as well as others. We want to be clear: Context standards are not about loyalty to a particular place. They are about learning to function responsibly with the other people with whom one shares a place. There are some examples of excellent context standards, including the Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools developed by the Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative, a partner in the Rural Challenge.

Learning Condition Standards: Every school should establish standards that assure appropriate learning conditions. Like other standards, these should originate in the community, not in an external authority. They should address issues such as the physical condition of the school, its location, a safe and healthy environment, the means and nature of transportation to and from school, and the child's access to school facilities. But they should address much more, such as the student's opportunity to participate in school activities, his or her right to be known and valued as a member of the school community, and to participate in school decision making as a laboratory for democratic living. Learning condition standards should define the school as a place of learning for all people in the community, a place where everyone is a "student," and everyone is welcome to learn, including adults. A school that is too often closed, or too distant or too isolated from the community and the people it serves, or too impersonal, will not provide a learning environment that is conducive to achieving high academic standards, any more than one that is cold, dark, and unsafe. Many rural schools that have been closed provided better learning conditions than the sterile, safe, architecturally excellent buildings that replaced them. Except where the safety of children is palpably at risk, local learning condition standards should have precedence over state facilities guidelines.

Content, context, and learning condition standards, closely integrated, will provide a measure for high academic achievement that is rooted in the character and personal strengths of the people the student knows and trusts most. The student will be at home with these standards, not a stranger to them.

Why Are Standards Important... and Potentially Dangerous?

In Brief: The struggle to achieve to high standards builds intellectual character that transcends the accomplishment itself. There is, however, a danger that standards can be used to establish "official knowledge," a state-determined correctness that damages intellectual integrity. We are concerned, for example, when we hear high academic stand- ards justified as a means of

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standardizing our society into the Anglo-America culture, or when singular emphasis is placed on standards as a means of competing in a global economy. Standards should not turn schools into agencies of social control for the politically or economically dominant.

High academic standards are important because, when they are met, the student has a fund of knowledge upon which to exercise judgment. But they are also important because they encourage rigorous intellectual habits. The struggle to achieve to high standards builds intellectual character that transcends the accomplishment itself. Producing to high standards may also generate ancillary benefits, such as greater capacity to adjust to social changes, to contribute to the economy, or to exercise civic responsibility. These ancillary benefits are by-products of the strong char- acter, rigorous habits, and good judgment that high academic standards nourish.

There is, however, a danger that standards can be used to establish "official knowledge," a state-determined correctness that dampens intellectual curiosity and undermines dis- course, dulling judgment, delaying intellectual maturity, and retarding pedagogical innova-tion. Some aspects of the current debate over high academic standards concern us with respect to these potential dangers.

We are concerned, for example, when we hear arguments justifying standards as a means of standardizing our society into the Anglo-America culture. This view has a long history, and it played a role in the origins of the common school, but we believe it is a mis- guided view. America, including rural America, has been and continues to be enriched by immigration and diversity. The challenge is to establish unity among people of differing backgrounds and views, not con- formity of mind and conscience or dominance of any ethnic group over others. Unity pro-duces common ground; conformity produces weak and vacillating values. Standards should not make us all wear one hat, or turn schools into agencies of social control for the politically or economically dominant.

We are also concerned when singular emphasis is placed on standards as a means of com-peting in a global economy. We believe, as do many business people concerned about the future of American public schools, that standards must count for much more than competitiveness. Even within the realm of work, employees must have diverse skills including human relations and communica-tions skills. And in a larger sense, education must be about fulfillment of the whole person if it is to serve national economic goals, whether in a local or a global economy.

Standards and Equity

In Brief: Standards help define the limits of state government's responsibility to provide equal educational opportunity to children and can therefore be used or misused to shape legislative and judicial decisions affecting equity. The relationship between high standards and equity is very important to rural communities because small schools can be closed in the name of raising standards and improving educational opportunity when, in fact, the objective is nothing more than to lower costs per pupil. This bias against small schools exists despite the evidence that small schools perform well, and especially in lower socio-economic communities.

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State government must empower every community with the legitimate authority and the resources necessary to provide an equal educational opportunity to every child. Providing educational opportunity is the responsibility of the community, and equal access to it is the right of every child. Standards help define the limits of those august rights and responsibilities. And because they do, they can be used and misused to shape legislative and judicial efforts to achieve equity for all children. It is tempting, for example, for states to use standards not as a measure of the minimum adequate education to which everyone is entitled, but as the maximum level of education the state is willing to guarantee children in poor communities. Some state officials fear runaway costs if access to an academic program with high standards is a matter of right. To reassure them, some standards advocates have been too quick to assert that achievement to high standards can be accomplished with reforms that cost nothing, or even reduce spending. Of course, that is sometimes true. But sometimes, producing to higher standards will cost more.

Indeed, the cost of producing to high stand-ards is likely to vary from place to place, depending on social and demographic conditions. If standards are set high, and no effort is made to assess the true cost of producing to these standards, then standards may become nothing more than the sad means of documenting further failures of public schools. We should not be glib about the cost of education, and we should not pander to those who will take advantage of any situation to justify lowering spending in public schools. Neither high standards nor adequate funding for schools should be sacrificed for the other. In effect, higher standards require public schools to accomplish a different purpose than they have been expected to accomplish in the past. We need to know what it will cost to meet that purpose. It is not enough to say that it is just a matter of no-cost reforms, especially in poor communities.

The relationship between high standards and equity is not, of course, a "rural" issue per se, but it is very close to the heart of rural education because of the widespread and unfounded bias against small schools. Unfortunately, small schools can be closed in the name of raising standards and improving educational opportunity, when in fact the objective is to achieve nothing more than lower costs per pupil, often at the expense of rural communities. Here, the weight of the evidence is clearly on the side of small schools. Research indicates that the lower the socio-economic status of the community served (rural or urban), the more important small schools are to student academic achievement. America should outgrow its infatuation with bigness in schools, and the sooner the better, if educational excellence and equity are important to us. No Excuse for Mediocrity

In Brief: Our concerns about standards are not to be taken as an excuse for mediocrity. Assessments that are linked to standards and are used to measure students' progress against the standards (not against other students) and to give guidance to their teachers can help make the standards effective and avoid mediocrity. Genuinely high academic stand- ards, in content, context, and condition, linked to assessments that measure a child's intellectual growth, her or his teachers' performance, and their school's effectiveness, will move mountains in the effort to restore confidence in our schools. And the challenge is to do so for all children, no matter where they live, how wealthy their parents or their neighbors are, the color of their skin, or the language they speak at home. For all communities, but

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especially for rural communities, it is important that these standards originate in the community and be rooted in local wisdom, experience, and place. Such standards will benefit children, schools, and communities by building on their shared strengths and challenging them to accept responsibility for themselves and each other.

We want to make it clear that these legitimate concerns about potential misuses of standards are not intended as an excuse for mediocrity, or to comfort those who oppose adequate funding for education, or who deny the state's duty to assure equal opportunity, or who are ready to abandon public schools and at-risk children altogether. We have heard all these political interests expressed as opposition to standards. We are not on their side. The challenge for every teacher, school, and community is to develop and teach a curriculum that reaches high academic standards while encouraging intellectual curiosity, inspiring wholesome debate, airing controversial views, preparing children to sing as well as to make money, and encouraging respect for all. And the challenge is to do so for all children, no matter where they live, how wealthy their parents or their neighbors are, the color of their skin, or the language they speak at home. We are deeply committed to equal educational opportunity, and our concern about standards is that they be used skillfully to accomplish that goal, and not artfully to deny it.

By the same token, we want to be clear that we support assessments that are linked to standards and are used to measure students' progress and to give guidance to their teachers. Student assessments are also a valuable means of measuring the effectiveness of a school and its reform efforts. Assessments and especially standardized tests take on an insidious nature, however, when they are used to rank children against each other rather than against standards. Such norm referenced tests engender unhealthy forms of competition without measuring actual progress in the student's personal intellectual development. They are the antithesis of testing for achievement against an absolute standard, whether that absolute standard is the student's own past performance or an expected outcome. And it is achievement against an absolute standard that is the logic of any standard.

The standards movement raises crucial issues for American public education. It is essential that the public response be thoughtful and effective. Genuinely high academic standards, in content, context, and condition, linked to assessments that measure a child's intellectual growth, her or his teachers' performance, and their school's effectiveness, will move mountains in the effort to restore confidence in our schools. For all communities, but especially for rural communities, it is important that these standards originate in the community and be rooted in local wisdom, experience, and place. Such standards will benefit children, schools, and communities by building on their shared strengths and challenging them to accept responsibility for themselves and each other.

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Contact Us

The Rural Challenge is America's only private, nonprofit foundation dedicated to strengthening both rural public schools and the communities they serve. The Rural Challenge supports education that deeply involves students in the history, culture, economy, and ecology of their own rural communities, and that engages these communities as full partners in the work of the schools. It accomplishes this through grants to rural school programs, advocacy work, policy research, and publications. Founded in 1995, the Rural Challenge began with a $50 million pledge from former Ambassador Walter Annenberg to support rural school reform efforts. Today, the Rural Challenge supports place-based education programs in more than 700 rural elementary and secondary schools in 33 states.

The Rural Challenge Policy Program seeks to understand complex issues affecting rural schools and communities, to inform the public debate over rural education policy, and to help rural communities act on education policy issues affecting them.

The Rural Challenge Policy Program
PO Box 68
Randolph, VT 05060
Phone: 802-728-5899
Fax: 802-728-2011
www.ruraledu.org
E-mail: rchallenge@quest-net.com